

VZCZCXRO4164

PP RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHDA RUEHDBU RUEHDF RUEHFL RUEHIK RUEHKW RUEHLA
RUEHLN RUEHLZ RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHPG #1356/01 3031532
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 301532Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY PRAGUE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8166
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PRAGUE 001356

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR/NCE EFICHTE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EZ](#)

SUBJECT: CZECH SENATE RACE - ODS WINS BIG, AS EXPECTED, BUT
POLITICAL PICTURE STILL UNCLEAR

1.SUMMARY: The right-of-center Civic Democrats (ODS) were the undeniable winners of the October 27-28 Senate elections in the Czech Republic. The victory follows the ODS triumph in local elections October 20-21, and the party's first-place finish in the general election June 2-3. Klaus is expected to ask ODS to begin talks on the next government this week. Party Chairman Mirek Topolanek, whose government failed in a vote of confidence October 3, has been strengthened by the victories in the local and Senate races, making it harder for President Klaus to entrust anyone else with the job of leading talks on the next government. The nation's second most popular party, the Social Democrats (CSSD), also picked up five more Senate seats, giving ODS and CSSD constitutional majorities in both houses. ODS continues to argue in favor of an ODS-led temporary caretaker government. CSSD continues to lobby for a grand coalition with ODS. Each side is claiming the election results support its position, laying the groundwork for the upcoming week of crucial but difficult negotiations. END SUMMARY

¶2. BIG GET BIGGER. The second round runoff for 27 of the 81 Senate seats ended Saturday with the Civic Democrats (ODS) the clear winner, taking 14 of the seats and narrowly missing out on two more. The victory gives ODS 41 of the 81 seats, a clear majority, and means ODS itself would be able to veto any bills coming out of the lower house. The Social Democrats (CSSD), who come in second in opinion polls, won six seats, bringing the party's total in the Senate to 12. CSSD is claiming a victory of sorts, pointing out that it beat ODS in 6 of the 11 head-to-head contests. ODS and CSSD, the nation's two dominant large parties, added a combined nine seats and now have constitutional three-fifths majorities in both houses of parliament and could alter election laws to favor big parties, something the smaller parties are concerned about. The big parties deny they have any intention to do this.

¶3. The Christian Democrats (KDU-CSL) who were defending 7 of the 27 seats, won four, lowering their Senate total to 11. In spite of this, ODS and KDU-CSL, which have recently been allies on the political right, together have enough votes in the two chambers to re-elect President Klaus, who will run again in 2008.

¶4. KDU-CSL was involved in two of the weekend's more interesting races. One involved Senate Vice-President Petr Pithart. Pithart, a former Prime Minister, President of the Senate, and presidential candidate, won by just 24 votes out of 24,100 cast, a victory margin of less than one-tenth of one percent. The ODS candidate who lost to Pithart graciously accepted defeat and chose not to demand a recount. Another interesting race involved Jiri Cunek, the Christian

Democrat mayor of Vsetin who ran on a campaign listing as one of his principal achievements getting the Roma out of his city. Roma activists had even tried to get former inhabitants back to the city just to vote against Cunek. Cunek took the highest percentage of votes of any of the Senate candidates, more than 71% of the 21,070 cast in his district. The strong showing will increase the odds that he will make a run for the currently vacant chairmanship of his party when it meets December 7.

15. AND SMALL STAY SMALL. The Communists had three candidates in the second-round runoffs. The Greens had one. Neither party won any seats, a reflection of the fact that small parties can achieve results under a system of proportional representation as is used in the lower house, but fare badly in a first-past-the-post system, as is used in the Senate. The three smallest parties in parliament; the Communists, the Christian Democrats and the Greens have 45 of the 200 seats in the lower house (22.5%), but have only 14 of the 81 seats in the upper house (17%).

16. Foreign Minister Sasha Vondra, who ran as an independent for ODS, won his runoff against a former CSSD MP, 58.6% to 41.4%. He is allowed to hold a cabinet post and a senate seat simultaneously. Vondra is part of the Topolanek ODS government which resigned October 11 but was asked to stay on until the next government is formed. If and when Vondra leaves the Foreign Minister post, he would be a strong candidate for the head of the Senate's Foreign Affairs Committee. Eliska Haskova Coolidge, who had worked at the White House and the State Department for many years before returning to the Czech Republic, lost her race against a local CSSD mayor 42% to 58%.

17. COMMENT. The Senate results show the increasing strength of Czech center-right voters. They also call attention to

PRAGUE 00001356 002 OF 002

the increasing strength of each of the two large parties, ODS and CSSD, relative to the smaller parties. Finally, the results show the Senate is still considered far less important than the lower house. Turnout for the 2nd round of the Senate vote was 20.7%, as compared to 64.5% in the June 2-3 general election. In the previous two Senate elections, the body was seen as a counterbalance to the lower house and a way of providing gravitas and sense to the vitriolic partisan debates that take place there. But only three independents were elected to the Senate this round. As the two large parties increase their share of the upper house, it begins to look more and more like an extension of the politics of the lower house, only with far less popular support. END COMMENT
GRABER